

Lorraine Martinuik / from WORK IN PROGRESS

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Doing the wash the same day each week is my day to sit longer at the breakfast table, have another cup of coffee, another piece of toast with more honey than it can hold. Take a bit of time. Look out the window the valley narrows to the north, the hills all fold into each other.

Out the window the forested valley floor at the far end of the fields. One wisp of smoke over on the west side. All the mountains from here to Vancouver stacked up behind each other roll to the south, flatten into the river's flood plain.

Bring out my journal I keep in a drawer he never opens. Think about things to a rhythm the washer makes, waiting for this load to be done. Sound a kind of drumming underneath the day.

A person could not have thought this life, three boys off on the schoolbus and a man in the fields whose body belongs to the land, whose first memory is wheat and oats in seed in fields his father's father cleared, tree by tree. Who lives out his thoughts and dreams without much speaking; we hardly talk. Maybe I would have seen, if I hadn't been so young I might have known how silence falls upon lives bound to a particular place, a piece of land. Attachment so deep there's no saying.

Look out the window. My neighbour comes across the field, down along the fenceline. I can see in her steps some kind of trouble her face will show when I open the door.

She comes on washday though not every week. To get eggs sometimes milk. She comes across the field to the fenceline and down along the big ditch, carries a plastic bag with egg cartons in it, the empty milk jar.

After the first load goes out on the line the sheets and all the whites signal flags for her to get out of her house I think she comes to my kitchen a kind of sanctuary.

How many mornings she hesitates at the back door, face full with what she wants me not to notice, or notice but never ask about. How many mornings she sits and fingers traces of what lies deep, what she has no voice for. He caught her off guard.

She stays in my kitchen as long as she can safely stay. Some mornings talks quickly the last minute, voice low under sounds of the men from outside coming in hungry the signal for her to get home.

The story of last night. How he drank. How he fills her mouth with words not hers. Twists her words so she can no longer speak when he starts in on her afraid, anything she says can and will he hit her, again the way rain at times pours down relentless, the early dark of winter and waters rising in the ditches in the fields she slogs through next morning.

How she sends the children to be safe in their beds and closes the doors to keep out the sound of him putting words in her mouth. Maybe the sound of falling blows she has nowhere to hide from. And later, silent weeping I wonder when he falls asleep; later I wonder if she wanders the house, watches from the hallway the faces of her sleeping children. Or does she curl up somewhere, arms around herself, holding together.

Too much between them now there is danger between them and nowhere to hide, nowhere left, though she sometimes slips in

behind a quick hope, any hope for a quick escape from the recited and fugitive apology.

From a man whose father grew up in a dirt floor cabin, a place where the earth was rich, trees few and on the small side. Long sun in brief summers, cold short days, for months each year.

Whose father drank. Yelled and was rough with the woman he loved who birthed and raised his children. Cried then the pain he held down all the waking day, inflicted by his own father and his own mother, old too soon, who had to leave him behind, frightened. Who left fingering the scars his father placed on she who tried to work beside and pleaded with, as if he were her father, when apologies were no longer enough. Who slipped away the night of first snowfall the year the baby was finally old enough to get around on his own, do a few chores in the garden, collect the eggs. Who took nothing with her, wore her only clothes, who had to go even knowing her children abandoned, wounded by the escape.

Whose father grew up heavy in his body, had to work too hard to feel any hurt fall exhausted to sleep to dream of nothing but a good crop, new calves in the barn. Nothing but how to approach the ruined photograph of family with a woman of his own he turned out to be too afraid to trust. Who drank in still at night the pain handed on by his father who punished him to make him a man.

Too much between them there is danger and nowhere to go. Her face has started to fall; no one will want her, all those children. No one will give her a job, all those years of being home the way a person is lost; to herself nothing more than the place she holds. Mother to her children, wife to a damaged man. Woman with no name.